

# Cajun Culture – an Interview

Leonard Deutsch

*Dave Peyton, a journalist for the Gannett Newspaper chain, was awarded a fellowship by the Alicia Patterson Foundation in 1975. For his project, "Cajuns and Appalachians: Folk Cultures in Transition," he spent half a year studying the Cajun culture to "determine what mass culture was doing to the folk cultures in America—at least, using these two folk cultures as examples." He found that "what the Cajuns think of themselves on a person-to-person basis—what they think about their culture, what they think about where they are going," is far behind the Appalachians in their thinking about their culture.<sup>1</sup>*

LJD: Let's tackle the question of who the Cajuns are and where they came from. Am I right in saying they derive from the dispossessed, the evicted people of Acadia? That there was a British governor in 1750 or thereabouts who rounded up the French settlers of Nova Scotia and ordered them to leave?

DP: He did more than order them. He literally threw them on ships without regard to family ties and dropped off a few at a time along the entire eastern coast of North America. They were split up intentionally—he didn't want them back together again. He knew if they got together they'd probably try to come back and take over Nova Scotia again. There were about 8,000 Acadians—about half of whom died on the ships or shortly after being dropped off. Only one colony—Maryland—accepted them as equals because Maryland was a Catholic colony.

But by word of mouth the Acadians heard about Louisiana and were attracted there in large numbers. Even the Acadians who returned to France were dissatisfied; they had been away from France for 150 years. So they too turned to the French speaking colony that served as a haven for the displaced Acadians. The French Creoles of Louisiana were most receptive; they saw the Acadians as settlers who would go into the interior and drive the Indians back. When the Louisiana area came under Spanish rule, the Spanish were receptive to the French-speaking immigrants too. There was no religious conflict and, besides, they just wanted to settle this wild territory. Spanish ships dropped the Acadians off wherever they wanted to go: some in New Orleans, some all the way up the Bayou Têche to St. Martinsville, which became the home-base for the Cajuns.

*LJD:* Weren't there waves of people coming to this area at various times—French noblemen seeking a refuge during the French Revolution, Frenchmen from Haiti following the Black revolution on that Caribbean island, as well as the Acadians?

*DP:* Yes. And you also have the Black French speaker in Louisiana called "Creole" by the Cajuns. In southwest Louisiana the Blacks have a French language all their own; it's known as Creole language, and it's a melodic language, beautiful French, whereas Cajun language is French in its roots, but its accent is distinctly southern.

*LJD:* Can you clarify the terms "Creole" and "Cajun" a bit more?

*DP:* I think over the years these terms—especially "Creole"—have fluctuated. Generally "Creole" refers to the French founding families in Louisiana, the original settlers whose descendants are still considered the old white aristocracy. Among Cajuns, however, "Creole" has a different meaning. They define Creoles as the black descendants of French-speaking slaves who inhabit Cajun country.

The term "Cajun" came into being because the people who had been dispersed from Acadia continued to consider themselves Acadians. And when the English-speaking people asked them who they were, they would say a word that sounded like "ah CAH djens"; this was too French for speakers of English so they would call them "Cajuns."

For a long time a stigma was attached to being a Cajun. In the 1950s the Cajuns were probably at their ebb; it was the low point in the history of the Cajun people. I suspect a lot of people were trying to deny their heritage at that time—up through the mid-sixties. And there's a reason for this. The state of Louisiana was under the control of politicians from northern Louisiana and had been for the first half of the century. The northern politician was what is commonly known now as the "redneck." He was the English—the British—the Celtic—the Scotch-Irish; and just like the British in Nova Scotia, he had mandated that all things must be British. When the Cajuns got settled down there and they suddenly found themselves under the control of northern Louisianans, they found themselves under the same kind of oppressive rule they had formerly known. The Scotch-Irish were trying to mandate the English language throughout Louisiana to the point that in the early 1900s a law was written banning the speaking of Cajun French in the school systems. The way they rationalized this is that Cajun was considered an illiterate language. In fact, it was; there was no written Cajun language. There was no Cajun grammar. Cajun was so different from standard French that you couldn't write it in standard French. Like a lot of the Indian languages, no one had written it down—no one had even attempted to.

Imagine what this ban has done to the child who has spoken nothing but Cajun for the first six years of his life, then goes into the school and is punished by the teacher for speaking to his friend in Cajun, a language he has heard all his life. He has never spoken anything else. Imagine what this must have done to the child's psyche. The teacher consistently denigrated the child's language—and language, of course, is the key to holding a culture together.

*LJD:* How many people were speaking Cajun at that time (in the 1920s and the 1930s)?

*DP:* I'm not sure. Right now there are estimates that as many as a million people in southwest Louisiana at least understand Cajun and probably could speak it, but even today they won't speak it. I met people down there who claim not to be able to speak Cajun but I know they do. This is because of the stigma attached to it—the same kind of reputation Appalachians got of being "hillbillies" in the '50s and '60s.

*LJD:* But haven't Appalachians embraced the term "hillbilly"? It's no longer a term of opprobrium, a badge of dishonor.

*DP:* The same thing has recently occurred among the Cajuns—they have come to embrace the term "Cajun." They have even gone further—there is a worse term than Cajun: coon-ass. Now, the Cajuns instead of fighting it, are embracing *that*. The Cajuns seem to be saying: We don't care what *you* call us, we are proud of what *we* are.

*LJD:* But what has happened to the study of the Cajun language in the schools? It was outlawed in the 1920s or thereabouts. What is the current situation?

*DP:* The law took its toll; it did its evil deed. The kids learned English. When they grew up and married, they didn't speak any Cajun in front of their children because they didn't want their children to suffer the same humiliation they suffered when they went to school. After a few years of schooling many youngsters automatically got the impression themselves that there was something wrong with Cajun—the language of stupidity and illiteracy. So the parents tended to speak nothing but English to their children. As a result, in one generation an entire language was practically obliterated.

*LJD:* But there still are, as you say, many people who at least understand Cajun.

*DP:* These are the old people. Actually, you had two groups of people growing up in the '30s and '40s: those who were isolated from Cajun completely and those who were around the elders and picked up the language—to the extent that they can understand it, even though they don't speak it.

*LJD:* Have the preservationists attempted to reintroduce the language on a formal basis into the schools and how successful have they been?

*DP:* The first attempts were in the early '70s by a man named James Domengeaux, a crusty old attorney, who founded the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana. He saw the problem. He realized that a key to preserving the culture was preserving the French language. He fought in the House of Delegates in Louisiana until he got some things turned around. He began a program with a little bit of state money; but a lot of his money comes from French-speaking Canada and from France to import French teachers who come in from Canada, France, or Haiti to teach French in southwest Louisiana. His goal is to make every school-child in Louisiana bilingual. The problem with his proposal is that for the most part the imported teachers are speaking more or less standard French; they're not teaching Cajun French.

Finally, a Mr. Faulk compiled a Cajun grammar book. He had been teaching standard French when a student who was proficient in French came up to him and said: "I still can't talk to my grandparents." The more Faulk thought about that, the madder he got, and it became very clear to him that he was on the wrong path. So he decided he had to give up teaching standard French and start teaching Cajun French, even though he was without a textbook until he wrote his own.

*LJD:* Do you know if this movement had caught on? How many others are duplicating his efforts?

*DP:* He was the first as far as I can tell. His students at Crowley High School spread the word. He had a waiting list. The last I heard, everybody in that high school, except five percent, wanted to take his elective of Cajun French. Ironically, a lot of teachers felt ill-prepared to teach this course which was in such great demand despite the fact so many of them were Cajuns. I imagine by now the interest has expanded, and I expect that now that there is a textbook, one half to two thirds of all the kids in that area will want to take Cajun French whereas twenty years ago you couldn't have gotten ten people out of the whole school district to take it.

*LJD:* I would imagine that if they have not had a written grammar that they have not produced much written literature that utilizes Cajun.

*DP:* Cajuns themselves have no literature written by Cajuns. The tradition is completely oral but the body of stories, songs and tales is very large.

*LJD:* Talking about Cajun tales, is Justin Wilson well known there?

*DP:* Justin Wilson is touted as a Cajun but he is despised as a redneck from northern Louisiana. He's mixed and mingled with the Cajuns and he makes standard jokes. My friend down there, Revon Reed, whom I consider one of the experts, himself a Cajun, says the Cajun joke is not the

least like Wilson's material. As a matter of fact, Cajun jokes tend to be profane; like other Latin jokes, Cajun jokes deal with sex and profanity.

LJD: I notice that in *Justin Wilson's Cajun Humor*, he uses English exclusively.

DP: Yes, and you can't tell a Cajun joke in English. There are many plays on words, according to Reed. They just won't translate well.

LJD: Getting back to the oral tradition, what recurrent themes and motifs characterize Cajun music and folklore?

DP: Unlike the traditional Appalachian ballad which tells a story, the Cajun ballad generally expresses an emotion. The Appalachian ballad, "Barb'ry Allen," for instance, goes on verse after verse to explain how Barbara spurned her lover who was named Sweet William, and like so many other Appalachian ballads, it gives time and place references. The Cajun ballad, meanwhile, is typically a mournful soliloquy of the terrible condition the person finds himself in because his woman doesn't love him. There must be scores of Cajun ballads which have this recurring theme: "My woman doesn't love me anymore . . . I don't know what I'm going to do . . . I may go out and hang myself . . . I may go out and drown myself . . . or I may do"—what seems to be the ultimate in the Cajun ballad—"I may go far away to that unknown land named Texas." The song usually goes on to indicate that once a young man gets to Texas, he will lose his Cajun identity and lose all thoughts of the woman he left behind.

The same goes for the happy Cajun songs, the good time songs. They don't describe an actual event or good time that happened; they're just an outpouring of happy emotions. One would think that with the history of the Cajun disaster that occurred in Nova Scotia, a lot of stories of the Evangeline theme would have been carried to Louisiana and repeated again and again. I didn't find that to be the case. During my entire research there I found one song which made reference to how or why the Cajuns came from Nova Scotia to Louisiana. This song indicates that God sent the Cajuns to Louisiana to bring the Indians to God. They called the Indians: "les sauvages," the savages. And in fact, since the Cajuns were settling Indian lands, they probably dispatched a lot of "les sauvages" to the Great White Father with their guns.

Superstition is rampant in southwest Louisiana, just as it is in Appalachia. As a result, much of the folklore involves superstition. A recurring theme in Cajun folklore is the *loup garou* or *loup garon*. This is the textbook superstition of the werewolf. Robert Abshire of Robert's Cove, who is a Cajun, told how, when his grandfather was a little boy, there was supposed to be a loup garou or werewolf in Robert's Cove. His story goes

that a man named Buck Arsenou was bitten by a werewolf and Arsenou went on to kill at least ten people. A man named Cowen Barousse found a way to get rid of the werewolf. Cowen asked an old lady what could be done and she told him to take a bullet, dip it in *gumbo rue* (gumbo gravy) and have it kissed by the Virgin. He had it done and he went into the woods to kill the werewolf; he was supposedly never seen again but neither was the werewolf.

Voodoo, brought to Louisiana by the Haitian slaves, also figures prominently in Cajun folklore. Mr. Abshire told a story about how sixty or seventy years ago a voodoo woman put a curse on the people of Robert's Cove. She supposedly summoned a demon from Hell; it looked like a panther but its eyes were red and it screamed like a woman. Many people were supposed to have seen it and heard it and it's still supposed to be roaming the woods of Robert's Cove. The Cajuns have mixed voodoo with herbal medicine and have come up with what they call a gris-gris doctor. The gris-gris doctor also figures prominently in Cajun folklore. In addition to the typical remedies used by voodoo doctors such as chicken blood, the gris-gris doctor will often use the sign of the cross which derives, of course, from the Catholic religion of the Cajuns. Even today many people in Louisiana still swear by the gris-gris doctor.

Numerous collectors have been in the fields of Appalachia for twenty to thirty years or longer collecting the oral history, traditions, and folklore of the mountains. This hasn't been the case in Louisiana among the Cajuns. Apparently the collection of oral traditions, folklore, has only begun within the past four or five years. And since the Cajun language has never been written and has always been spoken, one can only surmise that hundreds, perhaps thousands, of folktales once passed on in the oral tradition have been lost in the Cajun culture. In the last two decades there has, no doubt, been a hiatus in the telling of these ancient folktales. Perhaps with the renewed interest in the Cajun culture and folklore, many of the older people will recall these stories and come forward when called upon.

I get the impression that many of the older people have much folklore to tell but cannot translate that folklore from the Cajun language into the English language. Therefore, it appears it's going to take someone with a thorough knowledge of Cajun language to discover these stories and tales and write them down for future generations.

*LJD:* I take it that no Cajun novel has been written yet.

*DP:* Not that I know of. There is, however a book, *Lache Pas La Patate*, by Revon Reed, which literally means "Don't Drop the Potato," that is, hang in there, don't let go. Reed is the first Cajun writer I've ever known to be in the public library. The book was originally published in Quebec,

and Reed is now in the process of getting the work translated into English. It is an exposition of what the Cajun is: Cajun folktales, a little Cajun humor, the story of the Cajun.

LJD: Would you say he's the best known Cajun writer?

DP: No doubt about it, and he's virtually unknown. He's more known in America for his preservation of Cajun folk music. He and Paul Tate won the Burl Ives award in 1966 for this effort.

LJD: Have any non-Cajun writers made any great attempt to incorporate Cajun language into their work? Are there sizeable snatches in non-Cajun literature?

DP: No. All of them that I've read have the Cajun all wrong. There have been attempts—as in travelogues—to write about these “quaint” people, but they have never captured the essence of the Cajun. They're always stereotyped. No writer has ever done the obvious: the Studs Terkel routine; let Cajun people tell their own story.

LJD: A number of non-Cajun writers have focused on the Cajuns. Longfellow's *Evangeline* (1847), for example, is a sympathetic if somewhat historically inaccurate tale of the diaspora. Kate Chopin, too, included Cajuns in her *Bayou Folk* (1894), and *A Night in Acadie* (1897), although after having been born and raised in St. Louis, Missouri, for the first twenty years of her life and then marrying into a Creole family, she devotes more attention in her stories to Creoles and Blacks than to Cajuns. Her biographer, Per Seyersted, I might add, characterizes her Cajuns of the Natchitoches area as simple, honest, God-fearing but lazy and still basically the same “French peasants their ancestors were when they left the old country”; Seyersted additionally observes that Chopin's Cajuns speak Cajun English—not Cajun French. Where else, besides these works, is the Cajun represented in American literature?

DP: Few other places that I know of. Lauren C. Post, using a journalistic approach, wrote *Cajun Sketches*. Francis Parkinson Keyes, who lived in Louisiana had pieces of Cajun life in some of her books. But she didn't know much about Cajuns and wisely decided to leave them alone. The only other recent notice of the Cajuns I can think of is in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* where the folks get a Cajun to kill one of the Black men—indicating the Cajun would do anything for money. This negative view is ill-founded. Cajuns are not like that; they are not oriented towards doing someone else's dirty work.

LJD: Were they known, as the Appalachians were, for their desire for revenge?

DP: Not that I could tell. Even when the Louisiana legislature passed the law that you can't speak Cajun in the schoolroom, there was no upheaval. They accepted this edict. That's the way they are. They're a



Latin people, and their philosophy is live and let live. Attending some of their *Faid-do-do* puts to rest the idea that they are treacherous, unprincipled, mean-minded people. These are friendly, hospitable, and fun-loving people.

*LJD*: Like the Appalachians, they sound much maligned.

*DP*: Yes. There are, in fact, numerous similarities between the Cajuns and the mountain people. They find themselves in the same boat: they find themselves drowning in a sea of mass culture and, of course, that makes them brothers right there, along with a lot of other folk cultures in America, the enclaves in the cities—the Eastern-European enclaves—that find themselves breaking apart: the Irish in Boston, the Indians in the Southwest—all being inundated by mass culture. These people remain isolated, even in their drowning. They don't reach out to each other to try to find ways of preserving themselves. The Appalachians know nothing about Cajun preservation projects. In Appalachia we have been trying to preserve our culture strongly for the last twenty years; the Cajuns didn't start thinking about it until five years ago. Wouldn't it be useful if there was some dialogue between the mountain preservationists and the Cajuns as to what programs seem to work, what programs you should forget about, how to go about doing things? The Cajuns I spoke to needed to know that you can form a non-profit corporation if you want to apply for funding from foundations or the government.

That teacher down there, Mr. Faulk, writing a Cajun grammar book—the first Cajun grammar book in history—and he didn't know what he had. When he began, he was hand-writing the thing in composition notebooks; and he had gone to some publishers down there—some little local publishers—and of course he had been turned down because he could not come up with the \$40,000 to have it published. I said to the gentleman: "You know what you've got here?" I said, "You've got the first Cajun grammar book ever. It looks pretty good to me. The problem is that you're dealing on the wrong level. You shouldn't be dealing at the local level, maybe not even on the state level. Maybe you ought to be dealing at the federal level."<sup>2</sup>

A lot of these things could have been expedited had there been some cross-cultural dialogue about the vehicles and techniques of preservation. There is none of that going on. I think the potential is there for a non-academic book dealing with the two cultures, as examples, or maybe more cultures showing people in America that we have some very rich folk traditions and that we're all in the same boat: unless we do something fast we're going to lose them. If we lose them, we're all going to talk alike, we're all going to act alike, we're all going to dress alike, and we're all



going to think alike. I don't want to live in such a society. Everybody sits down now and watches the blasted TV set; that's our culture now, that's it.

*LJD:* Despite such dire views, what do you think are the future prospects for Cajun literature?

*DP:* I have no doubt there will be Cajun literature in the future. The area is too fertile and alive with stories, traditions, and legends to remain fallow forever. The Cajun story, however, will not be told by someone from outside the region who has simply a knowledge of literature and writing. The person who tells the Cajun story will have to be a Cajun himself or herself, or he or she will have had to have lived there and become sensitive to the Cajun life.

Like the people of the mountains of Appalachia, the Cajuns are complicated people, not easily understood, despite their simple life styles. Their minds are complex. Like the people of Appalachia, they cannot be defined in mass culture terms. And just like Appalachian literature, perhaps the best Cajun literature will come from telling the stories of the death of the culture itself.

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#### Notes

1. See "Is Appalachian Literature an Ethnic Literature?" an interview with Ann Lenning, who teaches Appalachian Fiction conducted by Leonard Deutsch in *MELUS Newsletter*, 3:4 (Winter 1976), 21-24.
2. James Donald Faulk. The book was printed privately in Michigan and retails for \$18.95 per copy. It is available from Cajun Press, Route 4, Box 388-E-3, Abbeville, LA, 70510.